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General debate on national experience in population matters: realizing the future we want — integrating population issues into sustainable development, including in the post-2015 development agenda

Statement submitted by Smile Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Life cycle approach to development complemented with civic driven change

A solution integrating population issues into sustainable development: Smile Foundation

Introduction

India has a population of 1.21 billion (Government of India, Census 2011) and growing. This trend is a reason to cheer as well as worry. On one side, it offers the advantage of a demographic dividend, where a greater proportion of people are young and in the working age-group. On the other side, a large proportion of the people lack basic amenities. As per Government of India estimates, more than 21 per cent of the population, which is close to 269 million people, lives below the poverty line and the absolute numbers of poor people are increasing.

This scenario in India poses challenges such as generating employment avenues for youth; ensuring not just school enrolments, but quality education to children; reducing the pressure on over-strained infrastructure facilities such as basic health care; ensuring food security and reducing malnutrition; striving for gender equality and empowerment, migration and urbanization posing unbearable strain on urban amenities; stress and over exploitation of natural resources and its effect on nature and its environment. There is a need to address this demographic imbalance and move towards sustainable development.

Overview of the issue as it relates to the work of the NGO

Smile Foundation was set up in 2002 by a group of young corporate friends with an aim to make a difference in the lives of the underprivileged. In order to achieve its mission, Smile Foundation works as a catalyst in bringing sustainable change to the lives of poor children, youth and women, with a life-cycle approach of sustainable development. Smile believes that development and the well-being of children is intertwined with their family and community, therefore, Smile has adopted the integrated model of development, weaving initiatives like education for children, healthcare for maternal and child health, skill enhancement for youth, and empowerment of women and girls.

Smile has a two pronged intervention strategy towards integrating population issues into sustainable development. While there is a need for integrated interventions to make a difference in the lives of the underprivileged, there is also need to capture the bigger mass of privileged people as partner in change to facilitate sustainable development. This is a unique proposition of Smile's model.

Currently, Smile Foundation is directly benefiting over 300,000 children and their families every year, through 158 welfare projects on education, healthcare, livelihood and women's empowerment, in more than 700 remote villages and slums across 25 states of India.

Life cycle approach to development

Education for Children — Children are the future of a nation. Smile Foundation believes that Education is both the means as well as the end to a better life: means, because it empowers an individual to earn his/her livelihood and the end because it increases one's awareness on a range of issues — from healthcare to appropriate social behaviour to understanding one's rights — and in the process evolve as a better citizen. Smile's education program caters to poor children who are mainly first generation learners. The process of schooling/learning leads to their sustainable development.

Healthcare for People — Poor and weaker sections of society suffer from adverse health conditions owing to lack of access, availability and affordability of basic healthcare services in urban slums & remote rural areas. Smile Foundation addresses these issues by bringing quality healthcare services to people through mobile medical units. Serious health problems lead to destabilization of the families by draining out all economic resources and crippling the further generation of funds. The programme Smile on Wheels has emerged as a practical solution to address this lacuna by addressing the healthcare demands well in time so that they do not become severe in nature. In addition to the diagnostic or curative care component, the programme also focuses on enhancing the health awareness of people. The Foundation also believes in strengthening the existing government health machinery by working in close coordination with government departments through grass root level health workers.

Skill Enhancement for Youth — mile Twin e-learning programme (STEP) is an initiative of Smile Foundation, working with a bifocal approach, for the sustainable development and economic independence of poor youth. The programme imparts employment skills to the youth from marginalized communities by providing them high-quality professional training. The programme has been instrumental in helping youth attain a basic quality of life and live a sustainable life with dignity. The programme not only facilitates the youth to integrate themselves into the mainstream industry but also boosts the confidence level of these youth as well as their families.

Women Empowerment — Swabhiman is a programme focused on empowerment of women and adolescent girls from low socio-economic strata of the society. The program also focuses on promoting education of adolescent girls through a component of scholarship to realize their full potential. Swabhiman promotes and improves health-seeking behaviour to ensure safe motherhood through counselling to newly married couples, pregnant women, lactating mothers. It also provides maternal and child healthcare services through mobile health clinics. The programme has been successful in enabling women and girls to lead a life of dignity, and function as change agents to improve health-seeking behaviour in the community with focus on maternal and child health. Thus, the programme has been addressing various population-related issues by helping women make informed decisions.

Civic driven change

Smile Foundation believes that unless members of the civil society are involved proactively in the process of development, sustainable change will not happen. Believing in this principle of 'Civic Driven Change', Smile Foundation

sensitizes the civil society with special focus on children in order to make them partners in its mission.

Smile Foundation came up with Child For Child (CFC) programme in 2006. Sensitization of privileged children and their parents, towards the existing inequalities around them, is an important objective of this programme. Privileged children are sensitized about the deprivation and pain endured by their less privileged counterparts. This programme seeks to inculcate a conscience and value system in the children so that they grow up to become responsible citizens and change makers. Before their minds are set with age, the Child For Child programme tries to make them count their own blessings and understand the plight of less privileged ones. Once they start realizing the worth of the privileges they are born with, they automatically turn their thoughts towards positivism and develop the right outlook. This eventually helps them develop into not only successful but responsible individuals in life. They grow up to become significant change makers, who contribute positively to the society.

Under Child For Child programme, Smile Foundation visits various schools and conducts engaging sessions for the young minds. It sensitizes children towards various causes and let them emerge as change agents.

Child For Child programme currently reaches out to nearly one million privileged children in 900 schools spread across 417 districts of India, every year. In addition, their parents and teachers are also involved in the process.

A way forward: expectations, specific recommendations

Life cycle approach to sustainable development

The programme models as well as the implementation strategies practiced by Smile have given excellent results. The objective of the organization has been to "pull out" the present generations of underprivileged people from the shackles of illiteracy, unemployment, ill health and disadvantage through our Life Cycle Approach. The aim is that underprivileged or disadvantaged people take charge of their lives and lead from a position of advantage with focus on larger sustainable development.

Gender Focus

All the programmes have a strong gender element so that the under-served and disadvantaged remain at the very core of intervention. The measures to improve gender equality and empowerment shall lead us to a more equitable society.

Engagement of civil society with special focus on privileged children

The process of change will be faster and more efficient when members of civil society join the mission. In line with this philosophy, Smile Foundation has been garnering and engaging civil society agents in the process of bringing sustainable development for the underprivileged. At Smile, we strongly believe that if each privileged person commits to bring out a deprived person from the vicious cycle of poverty or do his/her bit to make a difference then sustainable development of all in Indian context is not far off. In the last decade, privileged Indians have shown an inclination to extend their support for the cause of development, and the

organization is hoping that this trend will be further strengthened to have a nation performing well on various developments parameters.

We believe that when discrimination is reduced, it invokes positivism in the system. And for ensuring this, a strong civil society and participation of people also has to be ensured.